

MASKING INCONSISTENCY: THE TONKIN GULF CRISIS

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Because crises evoke images of threatening events appearing beyond control, they supercede previous rhetorical acts and assessments of them, helping to reconcile potential contradictions within an administration's stance. President Lyndon Johnson's response to the August 1964 naval skirmishes in Tonkin Gulf is a case in point. As the early months of 1964 unfolded, Johnson became convinced of the necessity of a United States intervention in Vietnam. This sentiment, however, was not reflected in his public discourse; there thus emerged a disjunction between the president's private image and public persona and between his actions and the proposed policies of Barry Goldwater—Johnson's political rival. The naval encounters in Tonkin Gulf allowed Johnson to reconcile his public persona with his private image without arousing suspicion. Tonkin Gulf, therefore, was an episode in masking inconsistency. It demonstrated how international crises permit chief executives to establish a credible and consistent public image.

Research in the fields of speech communication, history, and political science has underscored the rhetorical nature of international crises. Scholars have maintained that presidential discourse may construct an image of a crisis, often regardless of the situational characteristics spawning such discourse. Edelman, Vatz, Windt, and Berger and Luckmann, for example, have argued persuasively that "crises" are fundamentally the product of linguistic and rhetorical calculations.¹ Applying this theory, I earlier

contended that President Lyndon Baines Johnson generated an international emergency in August 1964 through his employment of weighted language, parallel structuring of sentences, role reminders, and ideological appeals. The 1964 Tonkin Gulf crisis, I concluded, demonstrated the capacity of chief executives to create social realities linguistically, lending salience to unobservable situations through rhetorical efforts.²

The literature pertaining to the president's ability to create crises rhetorically, including my own analysis of Tonkin Gulf, however, has paid little attention to the underlying assumptions anchoring this claim. Like most previous research, my earlier investigation presumed that these executive manipulations have been purposive, deliberate and calculated. Moreover, it was taken for granted that there were, and are, motives for action; yet the *raison d'être* underpinning a president's decision to build a crisis atmosphere still remains unclarified.

primarily rhetorical. The President announces to the people that a situation critical to the U.S. exists. Situations do not create crises. Rather, the President's perception of the situation and the rhetoric he uses to describe it mark an event as a crisis."

2. Richard A. Chervitz, "Lyndon Johnson and the 'Crisis' of Tonkin Gulf: A President's Justification of War," *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 42

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1. See, for example, Murray Edelman, *Political Language* (New York: Academic Press, 1977), pp. 43-49, and *Politics as Symbolic Action* (Chicago: Markham, 1971), pp. 66-67. See also Theodore Otto Windt, Jr., "The Presidency and Speeches of International Crisis: Repeating the Rhetorical Past," *Speaker and Gavel*, 11 (1973), 7; Richard E. Vatz, "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 6 (1973), especially 160; and Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967). The perspective of these scholars and others is perhaps best captured by Windt: "Political crises are

The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to uncover at least one reason capable of explaining a president's desire to magnify, and to provide significance to, certain international events. I argue that a chief executive's motive or intent may be tied inextricably to communicative and rhetorical precepts. Specifically, one underlying rationale for building crises stems from a leader's need to maintain rhetorical consistency. This article illustrates the importance of rhetorical consistency through an analysis of President Johnson's handling of the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incidents.

CRISES AND RHETORICAL CONSISTENCY

The Theory Explained

A survey of recent presidential administrations highlights the strategic importance of establishing a credible public image. The lesson emerging from Vietnam and Watergate is that a chief executive cannot for long continue to maintain a sizeable political base of power without spending time and energy to build and preserve a favorable public image.³

(1978), pp. 93-104. Citing Edelman, Vatz, Windt, Berger and Luckmann, and others, I argue that President Lyndon Johnson's rhetoric "created an international emergency," and "limited the foreign policy alternatives of the United States in Vietnam." It should be noted that in my earlier article research was not based upon an examination of the wide array of documents housed in the Presidential Library in Austin, Texas. The present essay, in addition to being grounded in a more thorough investigation of primary materials, is concerned with fundamentally distinct research questions, employing different rhetorical assumptions and methodologies. For example, while the earlier treatment operated out of the assumption that *discourse can create and add salience to rhetorical situations*, this article emphasizes how such discursive efforts may be prompted and occasioned by situational variables, including prior public and private utterances. Unlike the essay in *Western Speech Communication*, this investigation evolves out of a concern for locating the *raison d'être* undergirding presidential attempts to construct crises. The present article thus begins with the conclusions arrived at previously, exploring the motives and rationales capable of explaining such presidential initiatives. The notion of masking inconsistency is offered as one possible explanation of presidential crisis construction.

3. Nimmo, for example, has argued that a president's popularity is not so much a function of specific policy initiatives as it is a function of his ability to present positive images of those decisions. According to Nimmo, "People make political judgements without having much information to support" them. "Americans make quick judgements about what the federal government is doing, or about their rights as individuals; yet studies

One important constituent of a credible image is consistency. It almost goes without saying that we expect political leaders to respond to national and international problems in a consistent and clear fashion. Koenig and Neustadt, in their commentaries on the presidency, continually emphasize the need for public officials to appear to their constituents to be decisive, avoiding ambiguity and equivocation. An indecisive, unsure, and inconsistent president is perceived to be weak and incapable of effectively leading the nation.⁴

Fortunately or unfortunately, the practicalities of day-to-day foreign and domestic events make such an image-building campaign difficult at best. The subtle nuances of economic and social policies, as well as the complexities associated with diplomatic affairs, make the appearance of contradiction almost inevitable. This reality, coupled with public ignorance regarding the government's decisions and initiatives, poses an inherent rhetorical problem for the chief executive. In those situations in which a president feels compelled to alter his position, or in which the public has already adopted a negative image of him as being inconsistent, the president must take deliberate measures to avoid disastrous political consequences.

Crises provide presidents with at least one mechanism for masking inconsistencies and preserving a popular image. Bringing certain events to the attention of the nation and

indicate that only about one-fifth of the American people knows what the three branches of the federal government are called or know anything about the Bill of Rights." Citing a classic study on the subject, Nimmo observes that only about two-thirds of the public knows what government is doing about a problem in question. Despite such ignorance, however, Americans are constantly rendering assessments of presidential foreign and domestic activities. These evaluations, therefore, are a product of images—our perceptions and subjective representations of various phenomena. See Dan Nimmo, *Popular Images of Politics* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974), pp. 14-15. For a more systematic exposition of this thesis, see Robert E. Lane and David O. Sears, *Public Opinion* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 61, and Angus Campbell, *The American Voter* (New York: John Wiley, 1960), pp. 171-176.

4. See, for example, Louis W. Koenig, *The Chief Executive* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), especially pp. 92-113, and Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power* (New York: John Wiley, 1960), especially chapters three and five. A more recent treatment appears in Thomas E. Cronin, *The State of the Presidency* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975), chapters one, two, three, and five.

labeling them "crises" allows the chief executive to modify public policies, and often to equivocate without incurring serious political penalties or arousing public suspicions. In particular, a foreign crisis affords the president the ability to communicate an image of decisiveness and determination, to keep policy options open without appearing vague and inconsistent, and to establish a flexible decision-making posture. Because crises evoke images of salient, unordinary, unique, and threatening events that appear beyond control, they have a tendency to supercede all prior rhetorical acts and assessments of them, helping to reconcile what might otherwise seem to be contradictions within an administration's stance.⁵

Such a conclusion, while theoretically interesting, cannot be understood apart from an investigation of historical episodes. Hence, the remaining pages are devoted to an examination of a particular presidential crisis, namely Johnson's handling of the 1964 Tonkin Gulf incidents. I argue that this particular historical event lends credence to the theory of rhetorical consistency. Only by carefully recording the historical elements of this crisis can we extract those presidential motives resting at the heart of the theoretical claim being advanced. Historical research is thus presented as at least one way of documenting rhetorical and communication theory.

Tonkin Gulf as an Exemplar

On August 2, 1964 the *Maddox*, a United States naval vessel operating off the coast of North Vietnam in Tonkin Gulf, was attacked by enemy ships. Two days later, after a warning by President Johnson against the repetition of such attacks, a second assault was reported by a confused patrol consisting of the *Maddox* and a second ship, the *C. Turner Joy*. Following this report on August 4, Johnson spoke to the nation, ordering the strategic bombing of North Vietnam.

The events in Tonkin Gulf in 1964 have been the subject of considerable historical interpretation and speculation. At least two lines of analysis have been taken.

On the one hand, there are those who question the authenticity of the reported chain of events.⁶ Those who maintain that the attacks

were distorted or possibly fabricated usually cite the fact that on August 4, the date of the alleged second assault, the destroyers were undamaged. Moreover, the *Maddox*, the only U.S. ship that detected North Vietnamese patrol boats on August 4, reported mechanical difficulties with its sonar prior to the presumed attack.⁷

While the accounts of several historians tend to indicate fabrication and/or distortion, the available historical evidence reveals that the first attack was real; the "Pentagon Papers," the Senate Foreign Relations Committee investigation of 1968, and the testimony of naval and Defense Department personnel underscore the fact of the first encounter.⁸ The second "attack," however, has no such firm documentation.

Subsequently, there has emerged a group of historians who argue that while the conflict may have occurred, or at least while it might be impossible to substantiate a claim of fabrication, the encounters were invited or provoked by the administration as part of a dramatic pretext capable of securing the passage of a resolution granting the president the authority to widen the war in Vietnam.⁹

7. See, for example, *The Gulf of Tonkin, the 1964 Incidents*, Hearing before the committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Ninetieth Congress, 2nd Session, with the Honorable Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of Defense (February 20, 1968). See also, Joseph Goulden, *Truth is the First Casualty* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1969). Goulden's work is based on interviews with members of the crews of both American vessels involved in the encounters of August. All material is based on McNamara's testimony and Navy records as included in the Senate's investigation. This material coincides with the chronological records found in Box 14, National Security file, Country File Vietnam, Folder, Vietnam Gulf of Tonkin Misc. 1964, Presidential Papers of Lyndon Johnson, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Texas. Hereafter Johnson Mss. See also John Galloway, *The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution* (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970), pp. 48-66. Galloway includes an excellent discussion of the events leading up to and surrounding the naval encounters of August 2 and 4, 1964.

8. See also, Richard J. Barnet, *Intervention and Revolution* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1968), p. 217, and *Truth is the First Casualty*, p. 240.

9. There are several historians who take this view. See, for example, Eugene Windchy, *Tonkin Gulf* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1971). Also see Anthony Austin, *The President's War* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1971), especially chapter three, and Senator Wayne Morse, quoted in *Truth is the First Casualty*, p. 52. The clearest statement of this position is found in Ralph Stavins, Richard Barnet, and Marcus Raskin, *Washington Plans and Aggressive War* (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 98.

5. See, for example, Murray Edelman, *Political Language*, pp. 48-49.

6. William Miller, *A New History of the United States* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1968), p. 474.

Those maintaining this stance cite the fact that the two American vessels were admittedly on a spying mission to activate North Vietnamese radar and monitor its communications. In addition, they maintain that the United States Naval Command was well aware of the potential dangers on August 4, especially in light of the events of two days prior; the North Vietnamese officially had warned the United States following the attack on August 2 of the consequences of future naval operations.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the *Maddox* and *C. Turner Joy* were ordered to continue their spying patrol regardless of the consequences.¹¹

Unfortunately, the claim that Johnson invited the Tonkin Gulf naval encounter, using it as a dramatic pretext to widen the war with public and congressional sanction, cannot be fully documented at this juncture; most of the evidence is circumstantial. As might be expected, few statesmen leave, or even make, written records of actions or thoughts that would clearly show them to be malevolent. Current investigation into the Tonkin Gulf question at this level, therefore, seems to have reached an impasse.

Yet it should be mentioned that underlying these schools of thought are two contentions suggestive of Johnson's alleged motive; both arguments are indicative of the need for rhetorical consistency. First, the president desired an expanded United States military role in the Vietnam War in the spring of 1964. Second, Johnson needed an opportunity to accomplish this goal without appearing inconsistent. For that reason, Johnson had to provoke or even distort events which could serve as *prima facie* evidence for his claim that retaliatory bombing and a congressional resolution were appropriate measures. Because these suppositions emphasize the elements of congressional and public support, the overall question may be regarded as at least in part a rhetorical one. Thus, while it is fruitless at this time to advance a conclusive case of presidential fabrication and/or provocation, it might be more reasonable to explore

the two rhetorical claims underlying these arguments. It should be stressed, however, that the purpose of such an investigation is to illustrate communication theory. After all, even the documentation of both underlying suppositions could not count as positive historical proof for either the distortion or the provocation argument. On strictly rhetorical and communication grounds, nevertheless, such an exploration is warranted.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON'S INCONSISTENCY

The President's Pre-Tonkin Handling of the War: The Transition of Johnson's Private Rhetoric

"On June 17, 1967," declares Neil Sheehan, "at a time of great personal disenchantment with the war, Robert S. McNamara made what may turn out to be one of the most important decisions in his seven years at the Pentagon."¹² On that day, the secretary of defense commissioned what has since become known as the "Pentagon Papers"—a massive top-secret history of the United States involvement in Vietnam. An examination of the documents pertinent to Tonkin Gulf included within the study, and the *New York Times* exclusive stories pertaining to them, indicates that as the early months of 1964 unfolded President Johnson became more convinced of the idea that the United States had to become involved, perhaps overtly, in the Indochinese struggle in order to insure the survival of the government of South Vietnam.¹³

This transition in thought, and ultimate firmness in policy, became the backdrop for a president who, in public, clung tenaciously to an earlier stance of restraint and caution. This section of the essay highlights Johnson's private change of conviction documenting his decision in the spring of 1964 to become more directly involved in the Vietnam War and to keep open, as a viable future alternative, the possibility of massive overt escalation.¹⁴ The remaining section contrasts this private image with the president's public persona, indicating his need for consistency, and hence illustrating the rhetorical importance of the opportunity offered Johnson by the occurrence of the events in Tonkin Gulf.

10. See *Truth is the First Casualty*; Goulden's interviews with crew members clearly document our awareness of this warning. This point is consistent with official records of the United States Department of Defense. See also, *The Gulf of Tonkin, the 1964 Incidents*, and Box 14, National Security File, Country File, Folder, Vietnam Gulf of Tonkin Misc. 1964, Johnson Mss.

11. Box 14, National Security File, Country File, Folder, Vietnam Gulf of Tonkin Misc. 1964, Johnson Mss.

12. Neil Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers* (New York: The New York Times, 1971), p. ix.

13. *Ibid.*, Chapter Five.

14. *Ibid.*

The administration's decision in the spring to step up efforts that would allow an eventual widening of the war (if deemed appropriate) is perhaps best understood in the context of the clandestine operations ordered and expanded by the president in early 1964. The "Pentagon Papers" reveal that "for six months before Tonkin Gulf in August 1964, the United States had been mounting clandestine military attacks against the North, while planning to obtain a Congressional Resolution that the Administration regarded as the equivalent of a declaration of war."¹⁵ It should be pointed out, however, that Johnson failed to reveal the extent or even the existence of these maneuvers to either Congress or the public following the attacks in August. Yet, these covert military moves had reached such proportion by August 1964 that "Thai pilots flying American T-28 fighter planes apparently bombed and strafed North Vietnamese villages near the Laotian border on August 1 and 2."¹⁶

That Johnson was, in fact, giving serious consideration to American bombing prior to August is apparent from the nature and scope of administration contingency planning. According to Neil Sheehan, "Although a firm decision to begin sustained bombing of North Vietnam was not made until months later, the Administration was able to order retaliatory air strikes on less than six hours' notice during the Tonkin Gulf incident because planning had progressed so far that a list of targets was available for immediate choice."¹⁷ Moreover, the Pentagon documents indicate how "the target list had been drawn up in May, along with a draft of the congressional resolution, also as part of a proposed scenario culminating in air raids on North Vietnam." With the exception of references to the Tonkin Gulf crisis, this resolution is remarkably similar to the document sent by Johnson to Congress in August.¹⁸

Admittedly, contingency planning provides only circumstantial evidence. However, a systematic delineation of the covert military measures ordered by the administration and the stepped-up plans for overt war do document the gradual shift made by the president in the six months preceding the

naval encounters. For example, what the "Pentagon Papers" refer to as "an elaborate program of covert military operations against the State of North Vietnam" began on February 1, 1964.¹⁹ Operation Plan 34-A was the code name given to designate these clandestine maneuvers. According to Sheehan, the president ordered the program on the recommendation of Secretary McNamara, "in the hope, held very faint by the intelligence community, that 'progressively escalating pressure' from the attacks might eventually force Hanoi to order the Vietcong guerrillas in Vietnam and the Pathet Lao in Laos to halt their insurrections."²⁰ Several Johnson biographers maintain that during this initial phase of clandestine operations, the president remained "noncommitting" to combat.²¹ The Pentagon study, says Sheehan, confirms this hesitation by the executive in the first few months of his term.²²

It must be remembered, though, that on January 22, 1964, just prior to the beginning of the 34-A operations, the Joint Chiefs of Staff warned the administration in a memorandum signed by the chairman, General Maxwell Taylor, that while "we are wholly in favor of executing the covert actions against North Vietnam . . . it would be idle to conclude that these efforts will have a decisive effect on Hanoi's will to support the Vietcong." In this same document, Number 62 of the "Pentagon Papers," the administration was told that it "must make ready to conduct increasingly border actions [sic]" including "aerial bombing of key North Vietnam targets, using United States resources, sending American ground troops to South Vietnam, and employing United States forces as necessary in direct action against North Vietnam."²³

Although it is unclear from these documents what Johnson's position was on this matter in January, it is apparent that by February the President was moving closer toward a policy of intervention. According to the Pentagon documents, "after a White House

19. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

20. *Ibid.*

21. See, for example, Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

22. *The Pentagon Papers*, chapter five.

23. See, for example, Document #62, "1964 Memo by J.C.S. Discussing Widening of the War," in *Ibid.*, pp. 282-285.

15. *Ibid.* p. 245.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, p. 245, and pp. 294-296. The latter is a draft of a Congressional Resolution dated May 25, 1964.

strategy meeting on February 20, President Johnson ordered that 'planning for these kinds of pressures against North Vietnam [referring to the Taylor memorandum] should be stepped up.' The president's gradual shift in thought surfaces in the language used to engage the order: "particular attention should be given to shaping such pressures so as to produce the maximum credible deterrent effect on Hanoi."²⁴

The Pentagon study of 1967 notes that "the impelling force behind the administration's desire to step up action during this period was its recognition of the steady deterioration in the positions of the pro-American governments in Laos and South Vietnam, and the corresponding weakening of the United States hold on both countries." North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao advances in Laos, the papers indicate, "were seen as having a direct impact on the morale of the anticommunist forces in South Vietnam, the primary concern."²⁵ This same sentiment was shared by Walter Rostow, who was in the State Department at the time. In an interview conducted on May 19, 1977, Rostow stated that although he was not in a position to know what specific changes occurred in the president's thinking in 1964, there would certainly have been "a logical reason for such a shift based on the increasing reports of disintegration regarding the American position in Indochina." Rostow went on to say that in the spring of 1964, Johnson began to receive information about increased infiltration from the North and the introduction of North Vietnamese cadres. To the extent that a shift did take place in Johnson's thinking about the role of the United States in the Vietnam war, Rostow believed that this deterioration in early 1964 provided "the sound rationale" underpinning such a change.²⁶ The point to be underscored is that this deterioration in the Ameri-

can stance and subsequent shift in thinking by the administration was concealed from Congress and the public as much as possible "to provide the Administration with maximum flexibility to determine its moves as it chose from behind the scenes."²⁷

In accordance with the president's order on February 20, McNamara supervised the planning of two major operations, both indicative of the administration's change of mind and wish to keep overt entrance into the conflict as a viable policy option. The first, entitled "Border Control and Retaliatory Action," was designed to be launched on 72-hours' notice. These plans, argues Sheehan, "would include assaults against infiltration routes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail network of supply lines through southeastern Laos, 'hot pursuit' of the guerrillas into Cambodia, 'retaliatory bombing strikes' into North Vietnam, and 'aerial mining of the major ports in North Vietnam.'"²⁸

The second program was called "Graduated Overt Military Pressure." "This program was to commence on thirty hours' notice and would go beyond reacting on a tit-for-tat basis," Mr. McNamara told the president. "It would include air attacks against military and industrial targets."²⁹

President Johnson was kept informed of the progress of these plans throughout February and March. In addition, during the middle of March, he began receiving more information indicating the deterioration of stability in South Vietnam. Thus, according to the Pentagon study, on March 17, the president approved McNamara's recommendation to increase planning, noting that such preparations should "proceed energetically."³⁰

Within weeks of this executive decision, further changes in Johnson's thinking appeared. "In his March memorandum," says Sheehan, "Mr. McNamara mentioned the growth of 'neutralist sentiment' in Saigon

24. *Ibid.*, p. 249.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Interview with Walt W. Rostow, the Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Texas, May 19, 1977, Tape #1. That Rostow played an important role in the Johnson administration's Vietnam policy is made clear in an interview with Clark M. Clifford, The University of Texas, December 15, 1969, Tape #5. "And I think insofar as the relationship between President Johnson and Mr. Rostow is concerned, I know the President had a great regard for his loyalty, his patriotism, his dedication and his judgement. I think the fact that he had access to the president at almost anytime any day gave him a certain advantage, and from time to time I had the feeling that in order to get my view over to the president it took perhaps

additional active and strenuous efforts in order to keep pace with other views that were being presented to him daily by those who had such access to him."

27. *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 249.

28. Robert S. McNamara to the President, as quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 251.

29. *Ibid.* See, Memo for the President from McNamara, March 16, 1964, Box, National Security File/National Security Council History Presidential Decisions—The Gulf of Tonkin Attacks on August 1964, Vol. I, Folder, Tabs 1-8, Johnson Mss.

30. *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 251.

and the possibility of a coup by neutralist forces who might form a coalition government with the Communists and invite the United States to leave.”³¹ The Pentagon study, as well as several documents in the Johnson archives, highlight Johnson’s concern with this problem.³² In a cablegram to Henry Cabot Lodge in Saigon on March 20, the president revealed that he was intent on “knocking down the idea of neutralization wherever it rears its ugly head, and on this point I think nothing is more important than to stop neutralist talk wherever we can by whatever means we can.”³³

By May and June of 1964, the administration’s intent was clear. As noted earlier, in May, a congressional resolution had been drafted and targets for United States bombing raids had been determined. On June 4, Mr. McNamara, in an order reflecting the administration’s thought, directed the Army to “take immediate action to improve effectiveness and readiness status” for possible action in Vietnam.³⁴

Emerging from these statements and actions, therefore, was a president who no longer believed that the struggle in Indochina could remain solely in the hands of the Vietnamese people. The administration clearly was bent on preserving American interests in that part of the world with “whatever means” necessary. Again, however, it must be emphasized the president’s thoughts remained private. There is no indication that the public or even key congressional figures were cognizant of this transition in administration thinking and policy formulation.

The picture painted by these private deliberations is one of a president who was moving “energetically” toward an escalated United States military role in Vietnam, while at the same time continually hesitating to translate these plans into immediate military action and to inform the public of his change in policy. “The glimpses,” declares Sheehan, “are of a Chief Executive who was determined to achieve the goal of an ‘independent, non-Communist South Vietnam’ as he had enunciated in a national security action memorandum in March, yet who was holding

back on actions to achieve that goal” until he believed they were politically viable. He concludes, “Above all, the narrative indicates a President who was carefully calculating domestic political conditions before making any of his moves in public.”³⁵ This account seems to square with many of the comments made by Mr. Rostow. In Rostow’s words, “Domestic political considerations” were among the more important reasons behind Johnson’s decision not to act immediately in the spring of 1964.³⁶ The picture is thus one of both restraint (in public) and decisiveness (in private).

Although it is extremely difficult to assess the president’s “political” motivations underpinning this discrepant stance, a perusal of the administration’s public discourse and rhetorical choices, as early as January 1964 helps explain his decision to remain quiet in the spring, and hence the importance of the opportunity offered him by the occurrence of the events in Tonkin Gulf.

The President’s Public Discourse: The Emergence of Contradiction

In marked contrast to Johnson’s private conviction was his public image, characterized by restraint. On numerous occasions throughout the early months of 1964, the president maintained a position of not wishing to send American boys to fight an Asian war that should be fought by Asian boys. His discourse indicated an interest in merely giving material aid to the South Vietnamese in order to allow them to wage the war themselves. There is thus a disjunction between Johnson’s private sentiments and his public persona.

Recalling that Johnson’s change of mind took place between February and the end of March 1964, it is instructive to consider representative examples of his public rhetoric for the corresponding period of time. On February 29, just nine days after he ordered stepped-up covert operations by the United States in South Vietnam, Johnson told the American public, “We have a very difficult situation in South Vietnam. But, we are furnishing advice and counsel and training to the army of South Vietnam. And we must rely

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 251-252.

32. “Cable from President to Lodge on Escalation Contingencies,” document #65, in *Ibid.*, pp. 293-294.

33. Document #65, in *Ibid.*, p. 293.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 260.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 253.

36. Interview with Walt W. Rostow, Tape #1.

on them for such action as is taken to defend themselves.”³⁷

Similarly, Johnson told a news conference on March 7 that United States MPs would be withdrawn continually from Vietnam. “We see no reason,” said the president, “to keep the companies of MPs out there, after they have already trained the Vietnamese who can perform the duty equally as well.”³⁸ Eight days later, the president told the press that America’s role in Vietnam was one of giving aid, and that the struggle in Indochina depended upon the Vietnamese people. A similar sentiment was voiced by Johnson in his April 20 “Remarks on Foreign Affairs at the Associated Press Luncheon” in New York. Again, the president recapitulated the need to give only aid and “work through SEATO.”³⁹

A close scrutiny of Johnson’s public statements between January and August reveals no mention of preparations for overt warfare and no indication of the nature and extent of covert land and air measures that already were operational. Rather, the president’s comments were limited to statements minimizing the U.S. role in the conflict; a clear inconsistency existed between Johnson’s actions and his public discourse.

Johnson’s public rhetoric may also be contrasted with Barry Goldwater’s speeches at roughly the same juncture. Senator Goldwater was the forerunner among the potential Republican nominees. On several occasions, he criticized the Johnson administration for “being indecisive” and “failing to take a stronger military stand” on the Vietnam question.⁴⁰ A brief glance at a few Goldwater statements during the spring of 1964 exhibits the marked contrast between him and the public image of the president. For example, speaking in Oregon on the seventh of April, Goldwater, in reference to Vietnam, insisted that it “is a commitment we have to keep.” “We must decide,” he declared, “that what

we are doing is to win. This is a war and we will be in it for a long time.”⁴¹ In an interview with ABC News, Goldwater reiterated this conviction: “The first decision is one that we are going to win. We are not just there as advisers, we are down there with our boys, now, and the boys are getting shot. I think the most reassuring thing to the boys over there would be to put the United States government strongly behind what they are doing.”⁴² That Goldwater was willing to risk massive U.S. intervention is apparent in his remarks in Tucson, Arizona, on June 25: “Let me repeat my absolute and full support for whatever strong actions are needed to save Southeast Asia from Communist aggression and erosion.”⁴³ Perhaps Goldwater’s “hawkishness” was most evident when on May 20 he warned that he would “drop a low-yield atomic bomb on the Chinese supply lines in North Vietnam or maybe shell them with the seventh fleet.”⁴⁴

THE NEED FOR CONSISTENCY: AN INVESTIGATION OF PRESIDENTIAL MOTIVES

Goldwater’s public statements, with the exception of his desire to use atomic weapons, paralleled the president’s private thoughts. It might be argued, therefore, that Johnson was incapable of admitting his change of mind in public, not only because it would be rhetorically inconsistent, i.e., in direct contradiction with his earlier utterances, but also because such a shift would bring him closer to the position espoused and defended publicly by his political rival.

This political interpretation of Johnson’s motive is congruent with both the content and the tone of the Pentagon study of 1967. It is also consistent with Rostow’s observation that the president wished to avoid a “political push to the right” that he thought would occur if he announced in May or June the decision to become more directly and extensively involved in the Vietnam conflict.⁴⁵ It is

37. Johnson as quoted in *The Gulf of Tonkin Resolutions*, p. 159.

38. U.S., President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1965), Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-1964, p. 323.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 498.

40. Barry Goldwater as quoted in *Truth is the First Casualty*, p. 29. The differences between the president and Senator Goldwater are articulated more extensively in *The Pentagon Papers*, pp. 104, 114, and 152.

41. Barry Goldwater, Speech in Oregon, April 7, 1964, quoted in Files of the Aides, George Reedy, Box 1497, Folder, What Goldwater Said 1953-1964, p. 144, Johnson Mss. Hereafter Reedy File.

42. Barry Goldwater, “Issues and Answers,” ABC News, May 24, 1964, quoted in Reedy File, p. 144.

43. Barry Goldwater, “Remarks at Tucson, Arizona,” June 25, 1964, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 145.

44. Barry Goldwater, Interview with *Newsweek*, May 20, 1964, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 147.

45. Interview with Walt Rostow, Tape #1.

difficult to conceive of any other reason Johnson may have had for wishing to maintain a discrepancy between his public and private discourse. Admittedly, though, the research to date has uncovered no presidential documents or memoranda directly substantiating this political paradox.

That Johnson wished to avoid disastrous political consequences, nevertheless, seems reasonable in light of several actions taken and not taken by Johnson in the late spring and early summer of 1964. According to the "Pentagon Papers," in June Johnson requested a draft from Walter Rostow for a major policy speech on Southeast Asia that took an "aggressive approach." The President then rejected Rostow's draft, relying on "news conferences and speeches by other officials to state the official view." The study concludes that "in contrast to the Rostow approach, the President's news conference on 23 June and Secretary Rusk's speech at Williams College, 14 June, emphasized the United States' determination to support its Southeast Asian allies, but avoided any direct challenge to Hanoi and Peking or any hint of intent to increase our military commitment."⁴⁶

Because Johnson's unwillingness to talk prior to Tonkin Gulf is an essential part of the argument advanced in this study, this investigator asked Mr. Rostow about the nature of his speech and the reason for the president's rejection of it in June. Rostow refused to show his copy of the proposed speech, but was amenable to discussing it during the interview. He indicated that he was approached by two members of Johnson's staff—probably special assistants Douglass Cater and Jack Valenti—at a party on June 2, 1964. At that time they conveyed to Rostow the president's desire to solicit his views on the subject of Vietnam. According to Rostow, it was his decision alone to put the memorandum in the form of a speech. Thus, on or about June 7, Rostow drafted a policy statement to be given by the president reflecting Rostow's position regarding the United States' role in Vietnam. Although not working from notes, Rostow was able to say a great deal about the proposed speech. Its general theme was that the United States should become more directly and overtly involved in the Vietnam war, because of both our commitment to SEATO and

the deterioration of the situation politically and economically in South Vietnam. Rostow noted that what he had in mind and what the speech tried to convey was the need for "overt air and ground efforts by the United States."⁴⁷

When asked why the president rejected his proposal for a candid series of remarks indicating the United States' new policy in Indochina, Rostow responded that "political reasons were certainly a factor." In the course of the interview, he elaborated on two political reasons undergirding Johnson's decision not to speak to the nation in June. First, Rostow indicated that to act immediately and speak in June "would have caused lower ratings in the polls." Rostow likened the potential detriments to the Johnson administration to what had happened at the end of Truman's administration, suggesting that Johnson may have wanted to avoid such political costs. But second, Rostow noted that because of the Goldwater position at the time, Johnson "feared" that decisive action in June "would push the country politically to the right."⁴⁸ Rostow's statements, therefore, lend credence to the claim that there was a political motive anchoring Johnson's actions in the spring of 1964.

In addition to Rostow's oral comments, a draft of a presidential speech placed in one of the "National Security-Defense" boxes in the Johnson Archives was located. This speech was never delivered by Johnson, but it advances the arguments offered by Rostow. There is no date on the document, but it was put into Johnson's files on June 22 and is followed by several documents initiated by Rostow.⁴⁹ Thus, there is good reason to believe that this memorandum is the one solicited by President Johnson from Rostow.

In the same folder as the Rostow memorandum there was a note from special assistant Bob Hunter to Douglass Cater. In this memo, Hunter spoke of the need to talk about "drafts of speeches that are frank about Vietnam," and the need to keep in mind "political considerations." Without question, the note re-

48. Ibid.

49. See, for example, National Security-Defense (EX ND 19/CO 230), Box 214, Folder, ND 19/CO 312 11/22/63-8/10/64, Johnson Mss. This includes what I believe is a draft of the speech prepared by Rostow early in June. This is followed by a memo from Bob Hunter to Douglass Cater, which speaks of drafts of speeches that are frank about Vietnam.

46. *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 261.

47. Interview with Walt Rostow, Tape #1.

veals concern by members of the Johnson staff regarding potential hypocrisy and rhetorical inconsistency.⁵⁰ This political concern is seen especially in a series of memoranda from Rostow to the president and Rostow to Rusk in May of 1964. In each case Rostow exhibited political and rhetorical concern for the president, suggesting the "need for public information campaigns." According to Rostow, a "campaign of public information may, even now [May], be in order." "Such a concerted program," wrote Rostow, "would strengthen our hand in . . . laying a firmer base for action against the North." Referring to a possible congressional resolution, Rostow further highlighted the need for a "Presidential message." "Such a message," he claimed, "should not come as a bolt from the blue; it should itself be preceded by a clear indication of the increasing firmness. Such indication could be given only by public statements of high officials or by such devices as a White Paper."⁵¹

When taken as a whole, these materials highlight the importance of rhetorical decisions that were being made in the spring of 1964 by the Johnson administration, all of which were indicative of the precarious position of the president.

The president's rhetorical approach to the Vietnam issue, therefore, may be seen as one of sending up trial balloons that would avoid rhetorical contradiction and political ruination. An example of this indirect or backdoor method is outlined by Sheehan: "In June, State and Defense Department sources made repeated leaks to the press affirming United States intentions to support its allies and uphold its treaty commitments in Southeast Asia."⁵² The Pentagon study argues that these leaks were carried in several stories printed by the *New York Times*. It might be added that the *New York Times* version of the *Pentagon Papers* confirms this report.⁵³

Moreover, the analyst for the Pentagon discloses that "in June 1964, the President already felt 'the political convention just around the corner and the election issues regarding Vietnam clearly drawn' and so he

recoiled at this time from the repercussions of major escalation and seeking a Congressional resolution."⁵⁴ As support for this motive, the analyst cites a high-level meeting on both subjects on June 15, at which the president through a "White House memorandum" postponed the decision for the present.⁵⁵ In examining the documents in the Johnson archives, it was discovered that a memorandum fitting this description and dated June 15 had been removed from the file for "national security reasons." Furthermore, the "Presidential Daily Diary" for June 15 included an entry regarding this event.⁵⁶

This finding, coupled with what several biographers call Johnson's frustration in the spring of 1964 concerning when to act, lends additional support to the notion that the president was faced with a rhetorical/political dilemma. He needed an opportunity that would allow him to implement previously formulated plans with minimal opposition. In other words, he needed a way of reconciling inconsistencies in his public and private discourse. Such an opportunity of necessity would have to appear to be beyond the president's control, compelling him to act in contradiction to his wishes and plans. Also, the opportunity would have to be non-partisan in nature, capable of precluding a division along party lines. Only in the midst of this type of atmosphere could Johnson's hypothetical plans become operational without incurring serious political losses. This is not tantamount to saying that Johnson contrived or provoked the encounters of Tonkin Gulf in order to preserve a positive political image. It is indicative merely of the need for rhetorical consistency. Yet this is not to argue that the quest for rhetorical consistency was the only reason for the president's actions in August; my contention is that Tonkin Gulf furnished Johnson the chance to do something—to reconcile his public persona with his private image—without arousing suspicions about his motives.

That the events of August gave the president the opportunity to justify rhetorically the implementation of previously formulated plans with regard to the war is best documented by the lack of persuasibility in-

50. Memorandum from Bob Hunter to Douglass Cater, National Security-Defense (EX ND 19/CO 230), Box 214, Folder, ND 19/CO 312 11/22/63-8/10/64, Johnson Mss.

51. See, for example, National Security File Vietnam, Box 2, Folder, Vietnam Memos Vol. III 5/64, Johnson Mss.

52. *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 260.

53. *Ibid.*, chapter five.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 265.

55. *Ibid.*

56. See, for example, Daily Diary, Box 2, 6/1/64-11/30/64, Folder, Daily Diary June, 1964, Johnson Mss. See the entry for June 15, a.m.

herent in his only other alternative. In light of the president's prior public utterances, for instance, the subversion and alleged communist infiltration in Indochina provided insufficient persuasive ammunition to convince the public and Congress that a radically different policy option was necessary, viz., escalation and retaliatory bombing. As Stavins, Barnet, and Raskin contend, "The United States was prepared to widen the war unilaterally and justify it on the basis that the North was infiltrating troops into the South. But the infiltration argument . . . lacked the glamour attendant upon a surprise or shock attack."

In marked contrast, the Tonkin Gulf incidents afforded the administration the rationale necessary to present a persuasive case to the public and Congress for intervening in Vietnam. Unlike the infiltration argument, which Stavins, Barnet, and Raskin contend was "grey, dreary and continuous, requiring research and explanation," the events in Tonkin Gulf were more dramatic and convincing. "The death of Americans, the sinking of a United States ship on the high seas," they argue, "was dramatic, shocking and unique. It was the stuff of headlines." As they conclude, "The immediate dispatch of United States airplanes to bomb the North in response to the death of innocent American soldiers or the sinking of an innocent American ship could tap the romantic impulse of the American public and drum up sufficient support for a wider war."⁵⁷

That Johnson did, in fact, masterfully utilize the rhetorical opportunity provided him by the Tonkin Gulf attacks is clear. As I have argued before, the president mustered a host of rhetorical techniques, all of which helped to secure a crisis atmosphere and solidify popular sentiment behind his Vietnam policy. The president's handling of the Tonkin Gulf affair was thus instrumental not only in garnering support for the war, but also in masking inconsistency from the public.⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined one of the underlying assumptions behind a president's generation of a crisis atmosphere. Beginning with the already documented claim that crises are, at least in part, a rhetorical phenomenon, this essay sought to uncover a *raison d'être* for such purposeful and calculated acts by the chief executive. It was contended that presidential conduct often may be guided by a concern for maintaining rhetorical consistency. Yet we saw how the practicalities of day-to-day policy formulation make almost inevitable the appearance of contradiction. It was argued, therefore, that crises provide the president with a means of reconciling alleged discrepancies between words and actions. Focusing on a particular historical episode, viz., the Tonkin Gulf incidents, it was concluded that crises allow the chief executive to satisfy the need for rhetorical consistency.

58. Richard A. Cherwitz, "The Contributory Effect of Rhetorical Discourse: A Study of Language-in-Use," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, (in press).

57. *Washington Plans an Aggressive War*, p. 98.

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